DIGITAL LITERACIES AND THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

MADHAVI GODAVARTHY

College of Arts and Sciences for Women, Al Qurayat, Al-Jouf University, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

Influences from popular culture and digital media have placed teachers and students today in a highly challenging and exciting environment. The digital age is characterized by information sharing along with a sense of competition about whose information is more accurate and more important. This culture embedded in a sense of speed has in turn been changing the classroom-dynamic in terms of utilizing the new literacies of the digital age.

A well-balanced integration of social media can be viewed as an effective strategy in the teaching-learning processes by exploring the possibilities and converting students' interests into something more worthwhile. Including digital media and popular culture in conjunction with canon would yield positive results and it also helps in holding the interest levels of the students which is one of the challenges for a teacher in an EFL classroom.

KEYWORDS: Digital Literacies Activities EFL Classroom

INTRODUCTION

Influences from popular culture and digital media have placed teachers and students today in a highly challenging and exciting environment. The digital age is characterized by information sharing along with a sense of competition about whose information is more accurate and more important. This culture embedded in a sense of speed has in turn been changing the classroom-dynamic in terms of utilizing the new literacies of the digital age.

The transformations as such are felt almost in every facet of life and its influence on youth especially has been substantial. The student community which forms a major chunk of youth, are considered today's 'gadget geeks' in popular terminology. Be it a mobile phone, a tablet or an I-pad, most of the students are quiet well-versed with their intricacies and have internalized their presence. Thanks to technology, information and knowledge are just a click away. So when these 'well-armed' youth enter the classrooms, they bring along this knowledge too. It is this domain that can add to the potential of an EFL classroom. This enthusiasm of the students can be tapped by the teacher to supplement learning.

Social media is defined as "forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (as videos)" (Merriam Webster : 2004) The Oxford dictionary defines it as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking." Popular culture; a self-explanatory term refers to many products which "reach a majority of people through mass-media, mass-production or transportation" (http://eric.ed.gov/?qt=media+literacy&ti=Popular+Culture). If using technology is today's culture, the changes occurring in terms of the gadgets has become a part of popular culture. Technology thus has brought in 'new literacies' and its tools are viewed as givers and receivers of meaning and this process of giving and receiving involves interaction that carries values, beliefs and knowledge through written and oral communication.

A well-balanced integration of social media can be viewed as an effective strategy in the teaching-learning processes by exploring the possibilities and converting students' interests into something more worthwhile. Including digital media and popular culture in conjunction with canon would yield positive results and it also helps in holding the interest levels of the students which is one of the challenges for a teacher in an EFL classroom. The new participatory spaces like the e-mail, instant messaging, wikis, blogs, web-sites and the social networking spaces like the Facebook and Twitter can offer a scope for development. As English teachers we can try and create another potential space out of this space which can be utilized for language learning and teaching and for sensitizing youth to comprehend the core of human learning thus making their on-line identities more meaningful. Problem –solving skills, confidence-building, critical and analytical skills, building empathy and an over-all development of personality can be aimed at.

The assumption that social media may hinder student literacy could be proved wrong if it is handled with a sense of responsibility in the class-room. It also gives a chance to the teacher to see the lesson through a different lens which involves novelty and innovation. Initially it's the responsibility of the teacher to get to know the students and then use the various ways of social media and popular culture that suit the content by giving it an academic edge. Large and small groups can be involved in the process. A guided process can offer the student creativity, challenges, participation and engagement.

As a teacher from India, I know that not all educational institutions can afford a digital media setting. At the same time. Even in rural areas many students are able to afford mobile phones and some of them even computers. So even if the gadgets are limited, they can still be used by students on a shared basis aiming at co-operative learning.

Rationale

Educational research has brought forth many significant theories propounded by eminent researchers. Vygotsky, the educational psychologist proposed the theory of the development of cognitive functions in children through practical activity in social environment. (en.m. Wikipedia.org) Thus, a new paradigm was set by him in educational psychology.

Vygotsky states "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level." (1978:57) He also proposed 'ZPD'; the "Zone of Proximal Development" which focusses on what a child can do and what the child can do with help and support and what the child cannot do. This is a level of development attained when children engage in social-interaction. This is the area where the child depends on social interaction and peer collaboration for learning and this transformation is gradually absorbed by the child.

The concept of 'Situated Learning' which takes Vygotsky's theory into consideration, was explored by John Seely Brown. J.S Collins and Duguid who argue that :

> … Knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used. Concepts are developed in the context of their use as much the same way as meanings of words are developed. The authors compare knowledge to a set of tools and using them entails changing the user's view of the world and adopting the belief system of the culture in which they were produced. (1989: 32-42)

The same may be applied to the teaching-learning processes of English. It becomes a socio-cultural activity when the apprentice learns from the expert and the expert could also be one of the modes of digital literacies.

The Necessary Goals and Ways to Achieve Them

Some activities may be thought of for the purpose. For example, students may be asked to watch an excerpt from a particular English movie and share their responses in the group. The activity may involve interpretation, discussion of vocabulary, body language in terms of understanding another culture and so on. Thus the students learn from authentic contexts which offer a scope to develop a variety of skills through inter-action and scaffolding. They might be coming across many such 'posts' and scrolling down for newer ones. They might give a minute's thought to the same. Now the teacher can play a role in asking the students to give a better dimension and meaning to their experience. This could help them look for patterns in their experiences which in turn might help them accomplish goals. For example, students can be asked to imagine a study-room. They come up with responses from their own experiences. Later they can be shown pictures (mediated through print, digital media etc.) of study-rooms with vast differences that is rich ones and humble and also humbler ones like 'just some space to study' types. When these are shared in a social group, it has its own influence on the young minds in terms of 'Active Experimentation' that leads to 'Experience' that leads to 'Critical Reflection' and in turn results in 'Abstract Conceptualization'.

Real experiences help the individual learn advanced abstract concepts. The experiences might result in paths, which allow the individual to collect information to learn and become a member of the community of practice. Perhaps critical thinking and reflection may refine ideas or lead the individual to consider alternate possibilities. Each stage leads to the other and builds upon the former. In a situated cognition setting, learners should feel empowered to traverse these learning phases to garner new knowledge that ultimately leads to deep and thorough understanding." (Gee: 2012) 1

Interestingly this understanding can help not only the students but also the teacher. Through such applications they can refresh their existing patterns of imparting skills and knowledge.

The students can also take into account popular TV shows that focus on 'Human Relationships'. They can be led to examine the procedures of problem-solving and confidence-building and can present the ideas by forming groups and exchange their responses. Programs involving 'stars' from various fields also tend to catch the attention of the students and they can make the class-room a platform for debates or discussions regarding the same. These activities thus involve 'media literacy' which includes getting and giving meaning to language and images and/or sounds. "Having the ability to engage critically with popular culture texts creates the space to examine political and social contexts from which they are created" (Morell:2002: 73)

Digital tools like 'Facebook', 'Twitter', 'what's App',' blogging, 'digital storytelling' and so on have added to the processes of communication. These take into consideration a wide variety of areas ranging from the casual to political, social and cultural. The theories of learning through social interaction can be applied in these contexts. But of course, they give positive results only if applied with discretion. Students can be involved in activities using these tools which might benefit them in more than one way.

For example if it is a lesson on soft-skills, the teacher/facilitator can extend her class-room teaching by involving the 'on-line space 'of the students. They can be asked to post write-ups or pictures with comments on the same and the group can exchange information to be discussed in the class-room. Be it a lesson on 'Time -Management', 'Dining Etiquette' or 'Cross-Cultural Communication', it can be made more interesting through pictures and videos.

A thought-provoking quotation/ quotations can be introduced to the students. Then they can be encouraged to discuss and debate through the social platforms by supplementing the process with more instances from the web. The benefits of these activities could be involving the students through what they like doing best and develop their writing and thinking skills. Valuing the learners' freedom and coupling it with responsibilities has its own benefits. To reiterate, bringing in 'popular culture' is only a small part of the very significant larger whole that takes place in the traditional class-rooms.As the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) points out

> Although technology is important to literacy in the new century, other dimensions of learning are essential. Studies of workforce readiness show that employers rate written and oral communication skills very highly and collaboration, work-ethic, critical thinking and leadership all rank higher than proficiency in information technology. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills advocates for core academic subjects, learning and innovation skill and life and career skills along with technology skills. (Black,R.W. : 2009: 8)

So these 'other dimensions' can be met with by the teachers by taking into consideration digital age sensibilities, capabilities and value as part of their lesson plans . The process only involves using social media as a take-off point to hone the students' skills in a more interesting manner and it remains one of the many 'tools' the teacher is capable of using. In my experience of teaching Communication and Soft skills and English Language to students from technical streams, I have successfully tried to combine support from 'You-tube'; the popular video site to construct meaning. One of the texts prescribed for them was the autobiography of Dr Abdul Kalam; *The Wings of Fire.* Apart from the text being considered in the classroom the students were also encouraged to collect some interesting videos about the man and his work. The students were then asked to make power point presentations. The subject to be taught was thus extended seeking the support from on-line literacies. The students presented a glossary connected to their PPT, it was then followed by a brief introduction and then they presented the video. The sessions were followed by a discussion. The activity involved listening, speaking and to some extent writing.

Another activity can be conducted through 'Twitter' or 'Facebook'. A focus-question or a topic for a debate can be posted and the students can involve in communication through this social media. The discussion and the responses can be monitored. Some significant opinions can be discussed in the classroom too and this results in participatory communication. This activity can be looked at from the point of view of developing writing and speaking skills. These kind of discussions on-line and in class help students in improving their critical-thinking skills.

Students are looking at the world from more than books and assignments in an educational landscape that is molding itself to meet the changes in technology. Today's classrooms are increasingly focusing on interactivity and connectivity. Through their engagement through social media, students learn the nuances of 'net presence' and also learn to display the required netiquette. Slow-learners and students from vernacular backgrounds also have a scope to shed their inhibitions in the process of responding to a particular on-line activity. Their responses can be reviewed and bettered in the classroom and this process will help build their confidence levels and also give them a sense of participation.

More and more teachers today are creating 'Teacer-Blogs'. This space surely will provide space for a number of on-line activities. The teacher can plan activities connected to the lesson plans and at the same time lay stress on improvement of the LSRW skills. There could be pictures asking for captions, challenging questions, muted film clips can be posted and students can be encouraged to script dialogues, one can begin a story and each one can contribute to its

development. This activity can also be conducted between and among groups.

Individual contributions to blogs through this new media of mass targeting will help them to not only self-publish their work but also to put it to the world for criticism. This aspect can also find a place in the English classroom for discussion and evaluation.

Inspiring posts have the potential to make a student think from more than one perspective and can help develop emotional intelligence. Motivating talks, news, poems and so on as part of authentic material serve a higher purpose of molding the sensibilities of students for a better social consciousness. Getting motivated for positive attitudinal changes is also very important and as English teachers we have an opportunity to influence and inspire students to become good human beings. This process involving technology-mediated learning and literary practices does hold a promise to stimulate thinking and impact pedagogical approaches.

Creating podcasts could also help by taking into consideration the levels of the students. As the process involves recording, teachers can team up to develop English podcasts for language learning. They can anticipate producing English conversations for beginners, intermediate and advanced level learners, respectively. At the same time there might be a dearth of time and sometimes that of technical inclination and such times there are a number of podcasts that could be used for language input and language practice.(2)

CONCLUSIONS

Interactivity through social media aims at developing the 21st Century skills of the students and teachers as part of preparing for their futures. It is interesting to note that this mode of communication of the globalized age is also creating a special group of people; 'netizens' who virtually relocate themselves cutting across borders and cultures. This aspect brings about a change in their thinking processes creating a distinct identity for them in a culturally and linguistically diverse environment. (Jensen: 2003)

Utilizing the on-line time of the students could be an attempt in creating a text from a context; the context here being the 'on-line' activities. It is for the teacher to derive some teachable moments from these contexts. This in fact is a significant shift in updating oneself with the latest technology to function efficiently in modern academics and business and other activities. The process might result in an effective partnership between the students and the teacher offering an opportunity to learn and also unlearn (in terms of acceptance of cultural differences and so on).

Technology mediated communication and the significant participation of the students and teachers also highlights the importance of 'learner autonomy' in which individuals take responsibility for their own learning. (3) Psychologist Edward L Deci says we need to support the learners' sense of autonomy. According to him, creating the conditions for motivation is important. (Deci E L: 1995) The outcomes of participation by students in the communication processes involving media literacies give teachers a platform to create 'autonomy- supportive environments' in the classroom.

Social media have come to stay and further expand and it is for us to harness the power of this media. James Damico, an associate professor of literacy, culture and language education at Indiana University says that "Teachers already have the perception that the students are already tech savvy and can navigate and move around more quickly than the teachers. But we can't confuse that kind of savviness with critical evaluative skills." (Rich:2014:New York Times) I think these are words of caution to all of us aiming to utilize the potential of the students' digital literacies. It is important to give this new found space the right direction. Otherwise it might just end up as a populist technique; attractive but

shallow.

NOTES

- This is the 'Experimental Learning Model' described by Frank LaBanca in 2008.(https://ed240s12a.wikispaces.com/A+Situated+Sociocultural+Approach+to+Literacy+and+Technology)

- Some useful podcasts are available at the following:

http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com

http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish

http://a4esl.org/podcasts

- The term 'autonomy' was first introduced to foreign language education by Yves Chalon who founded 'Centre De Recherches et d' Applications enLangues (CRAPEL) in 1971 and is considered to be the father of autonomy in language learning. (Egel: 2009)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

1. Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Mind in Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2. Brown, J. S., Collins, A., &Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher, 18* (1), 32-42.

3. Gee, James. " A Situated Sociocultural Approach to Literacy and Technology". (https://ed240s12a.wikispaces.com/A+Situated+Sociocultural+Approach+to+Literacy+and+Technology)

4. Black, R.W. (2009*). English- Language Learners, Fan Communities and 21st Century Skills.* Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy 52 (8)

5. Morell, Ernest. "Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Popular Culture: Literacy Development among Urban Youth Author(s)." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 46.1 (2002): 72-77. Print.

6. Jensen, L.A. (2003). Coming of age in a multicultural world: Globalization and adolescent cultural identity formation. *Applied Developmental Science*, *7*(3), 189–196.

7. Egel,I,P. (2009). Learner autonomy in the language classroom: from teacher dependency to learner independency. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences,* 1, 2023-2026.

8. Sharma, Charu. *Graphic Novels Come to School.* The Times of India, Oct. 17th, 2014. (on-line version)

9. Deci, E L and Flaste, R. (1995). Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation. New York: Penguin Books.

10. Rich, Motoko. *Academic Skills on Web are tied to Income Level.* New York Times, Sep. 28th, 20014.